Vicious Venues

Powergaming

By Jason Nelson-Brown

This column provides advice for DMs whose campaigns are in trouble. Do your players constantly bicker or complain about issues both inside and outside of the main campaign action? Do your best ideas fall flat? Have you set up a situation that you now wish you hadn't? Worry no more, because Jason Nelson-Brown has the answers to save your game!

Powergaming: How to Deal with Super-High ACs

The topic for this installment of *Save My Game* is powergaming. Some players are so focused on utilizing the game's character-building options that they create problems for DMs who are trying to balance their games for more average characters. A case in point is players who build characters with ACs so high that they can't be hit at all by monsters that would otherwise be appropriate challenges for their level. What's a DM to do?

Problem: Powergaming and High ACs

Powergaming players can pose a serious problem for a DM who isn't prepared to cope with the ways in which they can stretch the rules. For example, how can a DM deal with a character who has a super-high Armor Class? I've seen characters use *alter self* and similar spells to raise their ACs to astronomical levels. -- Neonsamurai, from the D&D boards on the Wizards of the Coast website

First of all, it's not a crime for a PC to be good at some aspect of the game -- even really good. A player who has put a lot of resources into pumping up his character's AC shouldn't be penalized for doing so. The same goes for players who have chosen to beef up their characters' attack rolls, damage, speed, spellcasting, or any other ability. D&D is all about trade-offs, and if a player chooses to invest all or most of his character's resources into AC at the expense of other attributes, that's okay! After all, choosing where to place the emphasis when creating a character is part of playing the game, and some players enjoy hedging their bets in certain ways.

But those choices do have consequences. Every defensive spell a PC casts is one less offensive spell she has available. Furthermore, that defensive spell might be wasted if the character isn't attacked before its duration expires, and it's susceptible to dispelling as well. Likewise, every defensive feat taken is a feat slot not devoted to another aspect of the character. And gold spent on magic armor, shields, or other defensive items is not available for weapons and offensive or miscellaneous magic items. All that is as it should be in a game built with choices rather than limits.

However, the foregoing doesn't address a DM's very real frustration with a character who can't be hit in combat because his Armor Class is so high. So let's look at some specific ways to address the problem of very high AC in play.

Solution 1: Enforce the Rules

You may have to accept a good powergamer's efforts to ratchet up AC with grace, but you should never give a cheater an even break. Enforcing the rules strictly ensures that the game stays fair, no matter how players choose to allocate resources. For example, using *alter self* to increase Armor Class isn't as good an option as it may seem. It's a fine spell, but a character can use it only on himself, and only to assume the form of a creature of his own type (humanoid for most PCs) with HD no higher than his caster level (maximum 5). The caster gets the physical qualities -- both good and bad -- of the new form, and some of those may be worse than his own.

Aasimar or tiefling PCs may get more mileage out of this spell than most PCs, since they can use it to turn into outsiders, but few low-HD choices exist within that type. Furthermore, since many outsiders do not have humanoid forms, the PC's equipment may become unusable, and he may be unable to cast spells. Mephits are among the best choices for outsider PCs using *alter self,* since those creatures have low HD and various special abilities.

Solution 2: Limit the Damage

If *alter self* creates problems in the hands of a powergamer, *polymorph* creates worse ones. With this spell, a PC can turn into almost anything, and the boost to her natural armor bonus can be extreme. If you don't like what this spell (or any other, for that matter) does to your game, get rid of it! You're the boss, and you're perfectly within your rights to disallow any portion of the rules that doesn't fit your campaign.

If you don't want to get rid of a useful spell just because one person abuses its power, you can always place your own limits on it. Many of the problems it causes stem from PCs using it to duplicate exotic creatures, so limit the available forms to creatures from the *Monster Manual,* plus those that the caster has personally encountered or researched using Knowledge skills.

Still another solution is to create different versions of *polymorph* at different spell levels, with the higher-level versions allowing more powerful forms that offer higher natural armor bonuses and other benefits. Alternatively, you could rule that the maximum natural armor bonus the spell can grant equals the user's caster level, regardless of the form chosen.

In short, if a spell or other effect causes trouble, limit it in a way that matches what you think it should do, or disallow it entirely if it becomes the source of too many abuses and arguments.

Solution 3: Look at Your DMing

Another way to approach the problem is to take a serious look at your DMing style. Have you allowed exotic races that have super-high bonuses to ability scores or AC to be used as player characters? Are you interpreting rules regarding stacking too liberally--perhaps allowing the natural bonus from wild armor to stack with the one from *polymorph*? Are you giving out so much treasure that PCs can buy up all the AC-increasing items they want? Are you allowing them to create items or spells that grant AC bonuses of nonstandard types (such as sacred, profane, morale, luck, insight, exalted, competence, or dodge), so that they will stack with the more common armor, enhancement, natural armor, and deflection bonuses? If you answered yes to any of these questions, you may have to retool your house rules to cut down on such abuses. In that case, be sure to tell your players up front that you will be adjusting the rules to achieve a fairer and more exciting game--don't just spring the new rules on them without explanation.

Solution 4: Be Creative

If you want characters with ultra-high ACs to be in just as much danger as the rest of the party in a fight, try thinking out of the box. Combat doesn't have to be a one-on-one situation in which the monster's attack roll has to meet or beat the character's AC. Try setting up a fight in which the opponent relies on attacks that don't require attack rolls, such as area spells, automatic-hit spells, swarms, and trample attacks. Touch attacks -- including rays and other spells as well as trip, grapple, and bull rush attacks -- can also be quite deadly.

Against a higher-level party, try using a creature that has multiple attacks, since the more times you get to roll, the better chance you have to score a hit. You can also change the monster's feat selection to include Multiattack and Improved Multiattack if it qualifies for them, thus increasing its ability to hit with secondary attacks. Avoid using Power Attack against characters with very high ACs, since you need the full attack roll to have the best chance of scoring a hit. If the monster's statistics already have Power Attack figured in, adjust them to remove that feature. Finally, make sure your bad guys make the best possible use of *bless, prayer,* the bardic music inspire courage ability, and any other options they may have available for increasing their attack bonuses.

Solution 5: Team up!

Lastly and most importantly, team up your monsters! Tough monsters can become much tougher with a little help from their friends. Flanking the PCs is an obvious tactic, but you can also use team grappling against the party if the situation permits. Even better, surround the PCs with many enemies, some of which have reach weapons that enable them to attack from the second rank. When you use multiple attackers, have the ones that are least likely to hit use the aid another action to give the main fighters a big bonus.

Alternatively, some of the attackers can use *summon monster* to bring in additional creatures. Use these not to attack the party, but to provide the main opponents with bonuses from flanking and aid another, and to absorb attacks from the PCs.

Summary

Powergamers can cause headaches for a DM by creating characters who have capabilities far beyond those of comparable-level characters. Enforce the rules, but don't punish players for legitimate choices they make. Do, however, ensure that the game remains exciting for both the powergamer and the rest of the group by tightening up your house rules to minimize unfair advantages, disallowing effects that cause too many problems, using monsters and their abilities creatively, and teaming up the opponents to maximize their advantages.

Note: What works for the party can work for their opponents' as well; check out the recent Tactics & Tips article on hitting high AC, for more ideas.

About the Author

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